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**FORCE PROTECTION:  
Casualties, Consensus and an  
Operational Commander's Dilemma**

Randy R. Smith  
Lieutenant Colonel, USMC

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of  
**Force Protection: Casualties, Consensus  
And an Operational Commander's Dilemma**

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American support for military operations, and the willingness to tolerate casualties, are based upon a sensible--and Clausewitzian--weighing of benefits and costs. As a result, in limited wars and MOOTW operations that do not involve US vital interests, force protection becomes paramount to preclude a tactical failure from turning into a defeat with strategic ramifications.

" . . .the strategy of engagement and enlargement has committed the United States to the security of friends and allies throughout the world. . .executing the strategy requires the physical presence of US forces in many nations, exposing them to a variety of hostile acts."

**Gen. Wayne A. Downing**  
**Khobar Towers**  
**Assessment Task Force<sup>1</sup>**

### Introduction

Conventional wisdom holds that the American people today are much less tolerant of casualties than the generation that fought World War II. Generally, this is attributed to America's experience in Vietnam, and as a proof, those who argue this point often use the recent experiences of Beirut and Somalia as examples of America's quickness to disengage itself when the body bags start coming home. If true, it poses a dilemma for the type of interventionist foreign policy that has governed American military deployments for the past decade. Has America become the reluctant warrior? Are the American people unwilling to accept the risks that military action entails? If so, how does that affect the operational commander in assessing and balancing his risks?

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<sup>1</sup>Wayne A Downing, General, USA (Ret), Force Protection Assessment of USCENTCOM AOR and Khobar Towers (Washington: August 30, 1996), 6.

In World War II casualties sustained in combat were considered by most an unfortunate, but inescapable, fact of war. However, as American forces have become more involved in less traditional roles, with political objectives much harder to define than the "unconditional surrender" that was the objective of the last world war, the American people appear much less tolerant of the casualties that are the costs of military intervention. As a result, operational commanders may find that it will be force protection failures, rather than battlefield defeats, that deny America her strategic objectives.

As America moves into the 21st Century the protection of her forces has taken on an emphasis that would have been unheard of fifty years ago. Serge Schmemmann writes in the January 3, 1999, edition of the New York Times, Gen. Patton's admonition that "no bastard ever won a war by dying for his country," seems to have evolved into a dogma "in which avoiding casualties. . has been elevated to a central objective of a military mission, and spilling little or no American blood has become a primary indicator of success."

On the other hand, there are those who argue that America can still muster the resolve to see a military operation through to a successful conclusion, even when confronted with the

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<sup>2</sup>Serge Schmemmann, "War Without Casualties: Not Taking Losses is One Thing, Winning is Another," New York Times, 3 January 1999, sec 4, pg 1.

expectation of large numbers of casualties. Their contention is that America's tolerance for casualties has not changed appreciably in the last half of the Twentieth Century, and that the notion that the American people will not tolerate casualties in military operations is a myth.<sup>3</sup>

To gain a better appreciation for how this new emphasis on force protection may affect an operational commander's assessment of the situation we need to define the term and then narrow its focus. Next, we will look at some recent past examples where force protection failures either did, or did not, have a strategic impact on the mission's success or failure. Lastly, we will try to answer the question "why"?

### **Defining Our Terms**

While that Principle of War, Security, has always addressed the idea of protecting one's forces in order to preserve combat power, the latest drive has been to better define that portion we call "force protection." JCS JOINT PUB 1-02 defines force protection as that:

*Security program designed to protect soldiers, civilian employees, family members, facilities, and equipment, in all locations and situations, accomplished through planned and integrated application of combating terrorism, physical security, operations security, personal protective services, and supported*

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<sup>3</sup>Ralph Peters, "The Casualty Myth," US Naval Institute Proceedings, May, 1998.

*by intelligence, counterintelligence, and other security programs.*<sup>4</sup>

As can be seen by this definition the operational function of protection runs the gamut from anthrax vaccinations to theater-missile defense, and everything in between. For the purpose of this paper, however, we will consider force protection from the aspect of the low-end, low-tech threats that have been used against American forces successfully in the past. Here we find two instances in our recent past, that while similar in their circumstances, had profoundly different strategic outcomes.

#### **Beirut Bombing case study**

In June of 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and had placed a military blockade around the city of Beirut. US forces were inserted into the country to aid in the evacuation of some 15,000 Palestinians and Syrians from the city. The evacuation was successful and after its conclusion the Marines, which comprised the US contingent to the multinational forces, were quickly withdrawn.<sup>5</sup>

In September, after the assassination of the Lebanese President-elect, Bashair Gemayel, and the massacres at the Sabra

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<sup>4</sup>Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Related Terms. 23 March 1994. pg. 190.

<sup>5</sup>Robert L. J. Long, Admiral, USN (Ret), Report of the DOD Commission on Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act, October 23, 1983 (Washington, : December 20, 1983), VII

and Shatila refugee camps, US Marines were again introduced into Lebanon and this time were tasked with assisting the Lebanese government in gaining control of the area around Beirut. The original mission statement provided by USCINCEUR required the US force "to establish an environment which will permit the Lebanese Armed Forces to carry out their responsibilities in the Beirut area."<sup>6</sup> Later there would be some debate on the precise meaning and importance of this new "presence" role for US forces.

The environment into which the Marines were inserted was clearly permissive at the time; however, it was a volatile environment that just needed a spark to set it off. In 1982 Lebanon had over 3 million residents, seventeen officially recognized religious sects, two foreign armies of occupation, four nations contributing to a UN peacekeeping force, and some two dozen extra legal militias.<sup>7</sup> The one advantage that the Marines had was that they were considered a "neutral force," and one that would deal evenhandedly with the various contending factions that made up Lebanese society.

The Marines took up their initial positions at the Beirut International Airport where they would serve as an interpositional force between the Israeli forces and the populated areas of Beirut. Shortly thereafter, as part of their presence mission,

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 24.



the Marines began conducting individual and small unit training for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the LAF was involved in fighting with one of the major Lebanese factions, the Druze militia, and the Marines started losing their status as an impartial force--particularly among the Muslim factions. Shortly thereafter, in early 1983, the US Embassy was destroyed by a massive car bomb explosion that killed 17 Americans and over 40 others.<sup>9</sup>

After the destruction of the American embassy, fighting between the various militia factions and the LAF intensified and began to spill over into Beirut. As the security situation deteriorated the Marines at the airport came under increasing mortar and artillery fire, and Marine artillery, along with naval gunfire, began to return fire in order to silence the militia batteries.<sup>10</sup>

When the Marines took up their initial positions at the Beirut airport the Marine commander had identified the primary threat to his forces as being the indirect fire from the militia's artillery and mortars. Additionally, the Marines had to contend with sporadic sniper fire and the occasional remotely controlled car bomb. In looking to protect his forces from these threats, the commander moved them into the bombed out four-story

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 32.

building that had previously housed the Lebanese Aviation Administration. This proved to be an effective defense, and for over a year Marine casualties were relatively light. However, having a large number of Marines billeted in a small area became a large, and tempting target.

At approximately 0622, on 23 October 1983, a yellow Mercedes Benz truck accelerated through the parking lot adjacent to the Marine headquarters, crashed through a barbed wire fence, bypassing two guard posts (whose sentries were unable to fire on the vehicle since they carried unloaded weapons<sup>11</sup>), penetrated the lobby of the building and exploded. This terrorist act killed 241 US service members and wounded 100 others. It was also the direct cause of the later withdrawal of US forces from Lebanon.

#### **Khobar Towers case study**

At the conclusion of the Persian Gulf War, OPERATION SOUTHERN WATCH was instituted to continue the enforcement of the UN sanctions levied on Iraq, and to patrol the southern no-fly zone over that country. It was a long term operational commitment and the primary mission for Joint Task Force-Southwest Asia. The 440th Wing (Provisional), which had been in existence

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<sup>11</sup> The Marines were restricted from placing magazines into there weapons for fear of "an accidental discharge and possible injury to innocent civilians." Long, 89.

since the Persian Gulf War, had remained operational in SWA and was part of the JTF.

The personnel of the 440th were billeted in a series of high-rise building complexes near King Abdul Aziz Air Base in Dhahran. While Saudi Arabia was considered a benign environment, one in which American civilians had worked for years, it had never hosted such a large military contingent for an extended period of time.

In an eerie replay of the Beirut bombing, a precursor attack on American interests took place in November of 1995 when a terrorist truck bomb exploded outside the Office of Program Manager, Saudi Arabian National Guard (OPM,SANG) in Riyadh. In that incident a bomb containing 250 pounds of explosive detonated in a parking lot and killed seven people, five of which were American, and injured 35 others.<sup>12</sup> This was the first terrorist incident in Saudi Arabia that was obviously directed at Americans, and intelligence sources indicated that terrorists were continuing to target US forces in the country. In response to this attack, USCINCCENT declared a "high" threat level in the entire country.<sup>13</sup> However, protecting American service members in Dhahran was going to be a difficult task.

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<sup>12</sup> Secretary of Defense, Personal Accountability for Force Protection at Khobar Towers, Washington: July 1997, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 5.

The Khobar Towers compound was close to Saudi homes, businesses, parks, and places of worship and, as such, would allow a terrorist the ability to strike, essentially without warning, and from many different directions.<sup>14</sup> A vulnerability assessment was performed at Khobar Towers and it was determined that among the most serious threats to the facility would be a vehicle bomb that either penetrated the compound or was detonated along the perimeter. Recognizing the threat, the Air Force commander in Dhahran, instituted thirty-six of the thirty-nine recommendations contained in the assessment, with two of the remaining measures planned for the future. Those measures included stringing concertina wire, surrounding the compound with double rows of concrete jersey barriers, creating specially designed serpentine access routes, building machine-gun emplacements at the main gate, posting rooftop sentries, increasing Saudi patrols inside and outside the compound and tightening identification checks.<sup>15</sup> It appeared that the lessons of Beirut would not go unheeded.

While the commander at Khobar Towers had considered the possibility of a bomb being exploded along the perimeter of the compound, increasing the standoff distance proved to be too difficult. This was a particular concern near dormitories 131

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 9.

and 133 where a public parking lot was just 80 feet north of the buildings. However, the Saudi's would not move the perimeter fence farther out and away from the buildings. This was the weak link in the force protection chain.

On 25 June 1996 a sewage truck laden with the equivalent of over 20,000 pounds of TNT parked along the north perimeter fence near dormitories 131 and 133. The sentries posted on the roofs of the buildings noticed the truck as it arrived and parked adjacent to the fence line. When the vehicle operators left the scene the sentries sounded the alarm, and while the occupants of the buildings were trying to evacuate, the bomb went off. The resulting blast killed 19 US military personnel and wounded more than 500 others.<sup>16</sup>

### **Analysis**

In the aftermath of the Beirut bombing the Long Commission found fault in a number of areas including: intelligence failures that did not adequately identify the threat, a lack of adequate security for the headquarters building, and a failure within the chain of command to address those security failures.

While there may be some debate over those causative factors, there is no debate that the tactical failure to provide adequate

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<sup>16</sup> Douglas R. Cochran, LtCol, USAF, "Force Protection Doctrine: An Operational Necessity," (Unpublished Research Paper, US Naval War College, Newport, RI: 1998), 1.

force protection resulted in a catastrophic explosion that claimed hundreds of lives. Then, with the withdrawal of the Marines, that force protection failure also resulted in a strategic defeat for American foreign policy. In this case the new and difficult "presence" mission, while certainly a worthy humanitarian cause, incurred a cost that exceeded its benefit. Stability in a small, Middle Eastern country, where a threat to an American vital interest was not clearly defined, carried a price tag that the American people were unprepared to pay.

In the Khobar Towers incident, the Air Force's Inspector General and Judge Advocate stated that, "until the tragic bombing on 25 June 1996, the risk associated with the mission as executed from Dhahran, including the urban location of Khobar Towers, was acceptable."<sup>17</sup> However, both the Downing Commission and the Secretary of Defense saw it differently. The commander of the 440th Wing, Brigadier General Terry Schwalier, was held accountable for failing to provide the necessary protection for his forces and the subsequent losses at Khobar Towers.<sup>18</sup> However, from a strategic viewpoint, the casualties, when compared to the benefits derived from stability in the Persian Gulf, were considered insufficient to deter the United States from continuing the mission in Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>17</sup>Air Force Link, Report of Investigation - The Khobar Towers Bombing, 25 June 1996, <<http://www.af.mil/current/Khobar/>> (5 May 1999).

### Clausewitz and the 21st Century

Two similar incidents with two very different outcomes; there is obviously more to the issue than just an assumed fear of casualties. Which begs the question, is there any validity to idea that America has become reluctant to accept the fact that casualties come, part and parcel, with military intervention? Certainly, some of our enemies think that America's strategic vulnerability is our supposed intolerance for casualties, particularly when they are incurred in pursuit of objectives that often do not have an obvious link to our vital interests.<sup>19</sup> Saddam Hussein no doubt felt that America's sensitivity to casualties was an exploitable weakness, as he was quick to point out to Ambassador April Glaspie: "Yours is a society which cannot accept 10,000 dead in one battle."<sup>20</sup> Saddam drew this conclusion from what he thought was America's lingering doubts about Vietnam. His conclusion would later prove to be both faulty and costly.

The Vietnam War lingers in the American psyche as an unpopular war, and one that dragged out over many years and cost a high number of casualties. Desert Storm, on the other hand, was relatively quick, produced an unexpected low number of

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<sup>18</sup>SecDef, 4.

<sup>19</sup>Downing, vi.

<sup>20</sup>Schmemmann, sec 4, pg 1.

casualties, and enjoyed popular support. Considering these two experiences, the "conventional wisdom" seems to have extrapolated that popular support is dependent upon military interventions of short duration and coupled with a low number of casualties. This, in turn, leads America's enemies to believe that the way to defeat the United States is to conduct a protracted war and/or achieve a large number of gruesome and televisable casualties.<sup>21</sup> They see this as a critical vulnerability through which they can strike at America's center of gravity: the will of the American people. However, their conclusion is only half right.

It is not a matter of American reluctance to accept casualties regardless of the outcome, it is more a matter that our "information age" technology allows the American public to see, first hand, the cost of military operations, and quickly judge any mistakes against the proposed benefits. This is certainly not a new concept. Carl von Clausewitz pointed out almost 200 years ago, "the value of [the] object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*."<sup>22</sup> (Original emphasis.) This is supported by a recent

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., sec 4, pg 1.

<sup>22</sup>Michael Howard and Peter Paret, ed., Carl von Clausewitz, On War, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984) 92.



Rand study that shows that American tolerance for casualties has not changed appreciably since World War II.<sup>23</sup>

In his study for Rand, Eric Larson found that American "support for US military operations and the willingness to tolerate casualties are based upon a sensible weighing of benefits and costs that is influenced heavily by consensus (or its absence) among political leaders."<sup>24</sup> The American public is willing to weigh the costs of military operations against the benefits to be gained, and then look to their leaders to be united in their support for the mission. However, there is a danger here, as Eric Larsen also points out:

"Whenever the reasons for introducing US forces lack either moral force or broadly recognized national interests, support may be very thin indeed, and even small numbers of casualties may often be sufficient to erode public support for the intervention."<sup>25</sup>

In this regard the operational commander must understand that in wars with very limited aims (and in particular those operations we have come to call "other than war") the American people have traditionally been very unwilling to pay a price out of proportion to the value of the object. As could be seen in the Beirut situation, an enemy conducting a relatively cheap

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<sup>23</sup>Eric E. Larsen, Casualties and Consensus, The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for US Military Operations, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996)

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., xv.

<sup>25</sup>Larsen, xxiii.

attack on American personnel could not only hand a defeat to an operational commander, but also, because the American people had not placed that level of value on the *object* to be gained, they precluded America from attaining her strategic objectives. In the Khobar Towers case, both the American public and the country's civilian leadership recognized the value of a contained Iraq and a stable Persian Gulf--and were willing to pay a price for them.

### Conclusions

Force Protection is an issue that has been written about by numerous authors (some cited here, others listed in the bibliography), each of whom has drawn a number of conclusions on how to improve it. These vary from the creation of Joint Force Protection policy, to establishing special intelligence fusion cells to ensure that the commander has the latest intelligence on the threat, to creating special force protection working groups within the staff, to the simplest admonition to have the staff focus on force protection from the outset. While each of these may very well improve the way force protection is addressed, they miss one overarching aspect of the issue that the commander must keep in mind. The lesson here is that even with the dawn of the 21st Century Clausewitz remains relevant.

As we move into the next millennium America will continue to become involved in military operations where US vital interests are rarely threatened. As LtGen James Record points out:

"US national security objectives drive worldwide military deployments. These operations cover a broad spectrum of scenarios ranging from humanitarian operations to peacekeeping to war fighting contingencies. In each of these diverse operations, there is a need to strike an appropriate balance between Force Protection and other competing mission requirements. . . Even under the best of circumstances, this is not an easy balancing act."<sup>26</sup>

Keeping that in mind, it becomes equally important that as the commander does his risk assessment, he also adhere to another Clausewitzian dictum, and that is to recognize "the kind of war upon which [the commander] is embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature."<sup>27</sup>

Without the threat from a major peer competitor, the US military must consider the recent past as prologue for future planning considerations. The type of operations in which America has recently been involved, the Haiti's, the Somalia's and the never-ending deployments to the volatile Balkan region, will continue to be areas in which American forces will find themselves assigned in the future. It is precisely in these

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<sup>26</sup>James F. Record, LtGen, USAF, INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE KHOBAR TOWERS BOMBING, <<http://www.af.mil/current/Khobar/recordf.htm>> (5 May 1999)

<sup>27</sup>Howard, 88.

types of operations, the limited wars and operations other than war, that American strategic interests can quickly be derailed by successful attacks at the low end of the warfare spectrum. While no military operation is risk free, force protection will be a paramount concern for those that do not involve US vital interests. Here, any failure on the part of the operational commander to ensure that his forces are adequately protected could very well result in a defeat with strategic ramifications.

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